

Using Newspapers to Teach About the Election

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OBJECTIVES

Using newspapers in classrooms as primary resources will help students to:

1. gain a deeper understanding of candidates, issues and the election process.
2. study the elections in a context of reality and connectedness to other events.
3. pursue informed discussions about politics and current issues.¹
4. compare coverage of issues and candidates by different newspapers.
5. strengthen inferential and evaluative comprehension skills.
6. improve analytical reading skills.
7. develop lifetime habits of active participation in the election process and the government.²
8. synthesize different sources and writing styles for valuable information.

METHODS

Call national and local newspapers to order classroom newspapers. These activities will help enhance students' election learning:

1. Follow and analyze general election news coverage.
2. Collect and analyze polls.
3. Collect and analyze editorials.
4. Learn how to recognize advertising propaganda techniques.
5. Use the classified ad format to explore the responsibilities of public officials.
6. Use commentary to evaluate the results of the election.

1. This objective incorporates many suggestions of the new National Standards for Civics and Government. Among others, review the standards suggestions about the relationship—both current and historical—of the United States to other countries. See the new standards, Section IV.

2. Two sections of the new standards discuss this objective. Guidelines regarding how students can participate in the political system can be found in the new standards, Section V. Guidelines regarding how citizens can take part in civic life can also be found in the new standards, Section V.

1. Follow and analyze general election news coverage.

A. DOCUMENT CANDIDATES, ISSUES, AND EVENTS.

Create a timeline documenting the most important events leading up to the election, or a candidate collage of headlines, photos, political cartoons, quotes, and campaign promises from newspapers, magazines, and campaign materials. Include party symbols, political jargon, names of special-interest groups, and national and domestic issues.

B. TRACK CANDIDATE TRAVELS.

Encourage students to track a candidate's travels on a U.S. map, using newspaper articles. What states do candidates visit most often and why? Is there a correlation between the number of visits to one state and the number of electoral votes allowed? When do candidates plan their visits and why?

C. EXAMINE THE ISSUES.

Using articles about candidates and the election, underline all references to campaign issues and investigate each candidate's stand on the issues. Explore such questions as: Are there major differences of opinion or just differences in approach? Does the candidate criticize the opponent rather than address the issue? On what issues do candidates take a strong position and why? Do candidates hedge on certain issues because of special-interest groups? Do their positions change when addressing different regions of the country? How does one candidate's beliefs about a given issue differ from another candidate's? Do candidates offer specific solutions to a problem or speak in generalities? How do these issues directly affect you, your family or your community? With whom are you aligned? With whom are your family members aligned? How do your opinions differ from the opinions of your family? Why? Who do you think special-interest groups (such as environmentalists, religious organizations, business people, ethnic groups) will support and why? How do reports about the same candidate or issue differ from newspaper to newspaper?

Using posterboard, develop a classroom chart of such topics as candidates' positions on issues, your class's position on the issues and/or candidates, and appeal of the candidates to special-interest groups.

D. DEBATE THE ISSUES.

Host a classroom debate on the pros and cons of an issue or candidate based on newspaper coverage. Divide the classroom into sympathizers and nonsympathizers. As the debate continues, students should move freely to whichever side influences them most. Which issues and tactics were most compelling? The least? What would convince the staunch opponents or supporters to switch sides? Ask students to explore with family members evidence that would persuade them to change sides. Write a press release about the debate and submit it to your local newspaper. (For more information, see Chapter 4: Involving Print and Electronic Media.)

E. MONITOR PRE-ELECTION PRESS COVERAGE.

Tally the amount of coverage each candidate gets preceding the election, including positive and negative articles, cartoons, advertisements, letters to the editor, and photographs. Which candidate received the most coverage (both positive and negative)? The least? How did it affect public opinion? The opinions of your family members? Which candidates did the newspaper endorse? Compare newspaper articles with TV news and ads about the same candidate. Are the images portrayed in each medium complementary or contradictory? Compare coverage of the same candidate in different newspapers. Are the news reports the same? Encourage students to write letters to the editor or draw political cartoons about their analysis of candidate press coverage.

F. COMPARE CANDIDATE PLATFORMS.

Compare the platforms of candidates within the same party. How are they the same? Different? What do Democrats support and oppose? Republicans? How do these parties differ from minority parties (e.g., the Green Party, Independents)? What effect does a figure like Ross Perot have on the major parties and their platforms?

2. Collect and analyze polls.

Collect and analyze polls and surveys from various newspapers over several weeks and discuss their value and purpose. Who was sampled? Were the questions leading or objective? What is the relevance of polls to the outcome of the real election? How do polls differ or reinforce each other? How do recent polls differ from earlier polls? Why are they similar or different? What events have impacted a candidate's position in the polls? If the election were to be held today, how would your class/grade/school/family vote? Have students design a poll and question their schoolmates or family members. What is the difference between an objective question and one that prejudices the results? What is a "scientific sampling"? Polls are often interpreted by the public as indicators of which candidate will win an election. Is there any way an election winner can always be predicted? What is the difference between a preliminary poll and an exit poll? Compare past polls and actual election results. Which newspaper carried a headline declaring Thomas Dewey the winner of the Presidency in 1948? Why? Who actually won?

Suggest that students compile their findings and write a news article (for a school or community newspaper) about their results and how the results must be interpreted.

3. Collect and analyze editorials.

Clip and post newspaper editorials on a bulletin board. What is the difference between an editorial and a news article? Analyze the contents by highlighting the editor's position, circling issues, underlining the facts, placing X's beside negative comments, boxing opinions, and starring solutions. Encourage students to respond to editorials with their own letters to the editor. Display on a bulletin board and use as a basis for discussion or debate.

4. Learn how to recognize advertising propaganda techniques.

Collect campaign ads from different candidates. Review advertising propaganda techniques, such as glittering generalities, testimonials, and the "bandwagon" and "plainfolks" approaches. Which techniques can students recognize in campaign ads? What is the target audience? Is the advertisement effective, why or why not? Using clippings from newspapers (cartoons, headlines, articles, photos), create original campaign ads and have the class analyze each product. What propaganda techniques were used? To whom will this ad appeal and why? How could the ad be improved?

Encourage students to explore advertising propaganda techniques with their family members. Which techniques are used for different family members? When/where are these messages most prevalent (i.e., at what times on television, in what sections of the newspaper)?

5. Use the classified ad format to explore the responsibilities of public officials.

Study the general format of classified ads as well as the responsibilities, privileges, experience, and salaries of national and local public officials. Discuss the duties, privileges, and compensation of public officials such as the President, Governor, and Secretary of State, and write classified employment ads for their positions.

What qualifications must a responsible journalist bring to the job? Write an ad for a news reporter, an editorial writer, a cartoonist, or a managing editor.

6. Use commentary to evaluate election results.

Compare the results of the mock election with the results of the real election. In what ways are they similar or different and why? Which issues had the greatest impact on the election (both mock and real) and why? Using both pre-election and post-election press for references, did the candidates' messages remain consistent throughout the campaign? How accurate were the published polls? What efforts are the elected candidates making to fulfill campaign promises? What role did the press have in the success or failure of each candidate?